

Ac2\elections
July 20, 1990

(*Two weeks:*
1992)

Notes on Thomas G. Paterson and William J. Brophy, "November Elections: The Cuban Missile Crisis and American Politics, 1962"

(notes starting here with section "October 23-28")

Why was CII a "nuclear crisis"? Why have most observers believed that it brought the world measurably nearer to the nuclear brink than any other episode?

Not because it reduced the "critical risk" significantly for either side (though with larger numbers of missiles in Cuba it would have done this!) I.e., it did not dispose either side to be more likely or willing to launch a deliberate preemptive attack upon a given degree of belief that the other might otherwise strike first. Nor did it increase the likelihood for either that the other might launch a deliberate aggressive first strike.

Looking toward the later stages of possible escalation, it did increase the likelihood of circumstances in which one side's expectation of a preemptive escalation by the other would increase: hence, its own inclination to preempt. Even though both leaders were, evidently, determined not to let matters escalate so far, they might have found themselves (or others) taking decisions to escalate despite and in contradiction to this earlier intent, as body-counts and political stakes mounted. This was a risk they consciously accepted as they let days pass without reaching a settlement, or even, at first, without proposing terms.

But another risk of nuclear initiatives was posed in the earlier stages of escalation, at the point of US attacks on Cuba: the risk, not of deliberate nuclear response ordered by Khrushchev but of unauthorized action by a lower missile commander in Cuba, on the order of the actual SAM firing.

This risk was real (as the SAM example shows) and was probably consciously posed by Khrushchev: on the precise analogy of the threat posed by short-range nuclear NATO weapons in Europe. Moreover, it was perceived and taken seriously by McNamara and, he says, Kennedy. (And Taylor, it would seem).

Effective as it was as a deterrent, it seems clear that the deterrence so constructed was not absolute. High-level advisors in the US, both military and civilian, urged attack on the missiles despite this risk, and expected such attack to be ordered eventually if the missiles were not withdrawn. Even advisors aware of the President's strong desire to avoid this decision, like Sorensen, were not at all certain that he could ultimately resist pressure to attack if satisfactory terms were not achieved.

Thus Krushchev's strategy of putting nuclear missiles into an area threatened with imminent, short-range attack--for the purpose of deterring such an attack, but without assurance that this move was sure to deter rather than to provoke attack--was outrageously reckless. Just as US nuclear first-use strategy and deployment in Europe was historically, monumentally, unforgiveably reckless.

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(potential)

Paterson and Brophy's flat conclusion that "Kennedy did not engage Cuba and the Soviet Union in the missile crisis in October in order to silence his noisy Republican critics or to attract votes for Democrats in November" (last two pages) is unsupported by their analysis.

Given that the Soviet missiles were known to be there by October 16 and that their presence would become known to the public before the election, the authors simply fail to address the key question: As of October 16, what did Kennedy believe the domestic political consequences for himself and his party would be--not only on and before November 6, 1962 but in subsequent months and in November 1964--if he failed to take immediate action at least as aggressive and dangerous as a blockade of Soviet shipping?

As it happens, Robert Kennedy gives a precise answer to that question, one which the authors actually cite but immediately, illogically discount.

Nearly every account of the crisis quotes a discussion of October 24 between the president and his brother Robert, which the latter related in his memoir, Thirteen Days. At the time Soviet ships were heading toward the naval blockade; violent confrontation seemed possible. "It looks really mean, doesn't it," the president said. "But then, really there was no other choice. If they get this mean on this one in our part of the world, what will they do on the next?" The attorney general replied: "I just don't think there was any choice, and not only that, if you hadn't acted, you would have been impeached." The president agreed: "That's what I think--I would have been impeached." Does that exchange demonstrate that the Kennedys acted to save themselves politically? Actually, it demonstrates little, because President Kennedy intended to act, to force the missile from Cuba, from the moment he learned about them. He never hesitated in that intention; thus impeachment for inaction was a farfetched notion. Assuming that the conversation

occurred exactly as reported, it was an exaggeration perhaps induced by the tensions of the moment.

But the obvious question at issue here is, why did Kennedy decide against inaction in the first place, when he heard about the missiles? The authors seem to assume that politics played no part in this decision, even though all the reasons for expecting inaction to lead to impeachment--a political calculation that clearly encompasses and surpasses expectations of election setbacks in 1962 and 1964--were just as obvious on October 16 as a week later.

The authors also emphasize that Kennedy had showed his intention to act aggressively very quickly, "from the moment he learned" about the missiles, and "never hesitated." They imply that no real "decision" against inaction was or needed to be made, there was no explicit calculation of any sort bearing on this "non-choice," inaction was a "non-option," so far from Presidential consideration that its very possibility was a "farfetched notion."

But again, why did Kennedy move in this direction, so quickly? The fast, instinctive reaction hardly, by itself, proves or even suggests the absence of domestic political considerations--if anything, the contrary. The prospect of being impeached in a fortnight can be expected to concentrate the mind of a President and his political-manager brother wonderfully.

Probably the authors are ensnared by the general belief that nonpolitical strategic considerations had been sufficient to produce a unanimous consensus to the same effect, just as quickly, among all the President's top advisors, including those who had no responsibility, experience of or instinct for domestic politics. The President's framing of the relevant alternatives is then inferred to be of a piece with theirs, or even to derive from their non-political perceptions and recommendations.

But this belief, reflected in virtually all accounts of the crisis, happens to be wrong. Among the President's advisors, inaction with respect to violent threats against Cuba or Soviet forces was not only a live option for several of them when they first heard of the missiles, but it seemed probably optimal, the most appropriate, prudent and perhaps legitimate course. This was the immediate response of Paul Nitze and (according to Nitze) Dean Rusk; and it remained the view of the President's principal advisor on national security, Secretary McNamara, with some support from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maxwell Taylor, for some period even after the President had made his contrary view known (which settled matters for most of the rest).

If domestic politics came to bear--and it is hard to imagine that it would not, if the stakes seemed as high as impeachment (in

comparison to which, consideration of a Congressional election, the focus of the authors' inquiry, seems a straw man)--it would first and perhaps most importantly ^{have} been at the point of deciding that "something had to be done," on first hearing the news. Something aggressive, ^{publicly} violent, dangerous, humiliating to Khrushchev: to pay him back for the insult of the secret deployment in the face of warnings, to restore Kennedy's dignity and his machismo, his image of manly risk-taking, determination, defiance of legal restraint, dangerous unpredictability ("not a man to be taken for granted, written off"). A reprisal, a revenge.

This would have its irreducible dangers: without the reality of these, no restoration of image.

(A macho image, of course, is not only a matter of personal preference or style to a president in the Cold War era: it is an asset, virtually a requirement of the job, in the theater of the Cold War, as the rules of the game--or, the roles of the play--were defined to the public and acted out. Not only Kennedy but his observers and rivals could be expected to identify a loss of this presidential image with a setback for the US, a weakening of US ability to safeguard "its interests," as these in turn were defined by the US Establishment.

And anything that encouraged "encroachment" upon these interests by the Soviets, or made American elites feel impelled to take forceful countermeasures, posed risks of war and nuclear crisis that affected all Americans, indeed all humans. Thus, most members of the ExCom probably did not agree with McNamara's immediate assessment that the stakes were only domestic political: appearances were seen to matter substantially, including appearances as to the President's character. McNamara himself may have been convinced of this; though the question still remained for him just how great a level of risk was justified under these circumstances.)

The dangers of a blockade were real despite Kennedy's determination to control them as much as possible and what may have been his secret determination (a major tentative finding of my investigation) not to go beyond this measure to actions that would have been even more dangerous. These were the dangers the Kennedys were confronting imminently on Wednesday morning as Soviet ships pressed on toward the blockade line, provoking their self-reassuring reflections that there had been "no choice" (i.e., they were not really responsible for the ominous uncertainties they were facing or for the worse that might follow).

But there had been a choice. The alternatives of either accepting the presence of the missiles or of bargaining them out (in the absence of US threats of violent, illegal action) were not only present in the minds of major US officials but had high-level proponents.

Even a real prospect of impeachment would not really foreclose the issue, with stakes as high as this. (Kennedy's own Profiles in Courage had described examples of Congressional courage selected and defined precisely on the basis of the politician's willingness to risk his political future by acting against the strong wishes of powerful constituencies that he represented).

I believe myself that Kennedy would probably not have taken the risks of acting as he did if he had seen the risks of inaction as exclusively personal and political. His perception of security stakes for the national as a whole and its alliances was not just self-serving; anyone educated in and accepting the premises of the Cold War ideology--such as me and all my colleagues--would have seen these stakes and risks. Moreover, in this case these assessments still do not seem entirely unjustified, looking back almost thirty years. They had to do with the likelihood that a passive acquiescence in this particular Soviet move--considering its location and precursors--would lead promptly to even more serious challenges elsewhere, one of which would be likely to trigger major war under circumstances less promising and more dangerous than the current ones.

All the "lessons of Munich" and the analogies with the Thirties that haunted Cold War memories and discussions came to bear here. As I had said about the Berlin crisis in my Lowell Lectures three years earlier, the problem was not (as Khrushchev himself pointed out) that Khrushchev was like Hitler; the danger was, I believed, that under certain conditions of the strategic balance (the then-feared, though imaginary "missile gap") and certain types of external encouragement and internal pressures, he might become like Hitler, in his risk-taking.

My concern may have been exaggerated, but it still does not seem to me to have been wholly illusory. Certainly in 1962 the unexpected news of his challenge in the Caribbean appeared to me as confirmation of the validity of my fears in 1959.

This is the meaning of Kennedy's observation: "It looks really mean, doesn't it...But then, really there was no other choice. If they get this mean on this one in our part of the world, what will they do on the next?" That is, if the Soviets succeeded--without evoking a forceful challenge from the US--in moving against US desires in a region where the US Government traditionally felt that its wishes should be law, in the face of Presidential warnings backed up by, or virtually compelled by, public and Congressional pressure, then what might they not try next, in an area where international stakes as seen by the President and his allies might be even higher (Berlin or elsewhere) but the tradition of and domestic political support for US intervention less obvious?

[See fear of Munich--Prague--Poland syndrome. Fear that 1) the adversary will wishfully estimate the risks of our reaction to the next challenge only on the precedent of an "appeasing" backdown this time, not taking into account that this humiliation may create political pressures and personal commitments that make a backdown less likely in the future, even though the odds and stakes look less favorable in the next confrontation; 2) fear that the latter dynamic will really operate at home: that a humiliating backdown now will dispose the electorate to press for, and the leaders to undertake, a later commitment that is truly imprudent, reckless, one that ought to be avoided especially in the circumstances created by the first backdown (including a worsening of the terms of confrontation and the encouragement of the adversary's hopes and demoralization of one's allies); 3) fear that the first two effects will combine to produce an explosion even more serious than was likely to result from a violent confrontation instead of the initial backdown.

The least familiar part of this calculation is the second stage. It has two aspects. The first is an historically-based fear of one's own political system, of the "reckless, irrational" response of both leaders and the electorate to a defeat, a humiliation, a failed act of "appeasement" or compromise. This elite, rather esoteric concern (rarely mentioned publicly) has among other bases a little-discussed historical referent. I recall several discussions with historically-aware members of the national security establishment who expressed the judgment that Chamberlain's gratuitous guarantee of Polish security (not based on a prior treaty or alliance) had been, at least, questionable under the circumstances of late 1939: certainly, dangerous and almost surely ineffective. It was unlikely to deter, precisely because there was almost nothing Britain could do to back it up or to help Poland if attacked. But British inaction (which actually followed, in the Phony War of 1939-40) despite this commitment, and in the face of inevitable Polish defeat, ^{was to prove} would be one more encouragement to ^{us to} take the later step of attacking the Western allies who had declared war on Germany, as happened in 1940.

Yet the Chamberlain commitment, unnecessary, unhelpful and unwise as my interlocutors thought it to be (a judgment totally unfamiliar to me at the time, at the turn of the decade), had been, they thought, virtually inescapable for him, for basically domestically political reasons: his own political embarrassment, and the domestic demands aroused, by Hitler's taking Prague, flaunting the assurances he had made, and Chamberlain had publicly accepted at and after Munich.

Thus the sequence. First, the Allies failed to reject Hitler's demands at Munich, when the Allies had a very strong legal position, had made clear treaty commitments, and confronted Hitler with a strong, well-equipped Czech Army behind strong border fortifications. This last combination might well have defeated the

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offensive Hitler not only threatened but planned. Hitler's generals knew this better than he did--and even they were shocked, on later occupying the fortifications, to realize the risks Hitler had been running--which had led to serious military planning to oppose him.

Chamberlain's acceptance of Hitler's invitation to negotiate postponed plans for a coup, and the Allies' concessions ended internal German opposition to Hitler's increasingly confident aggressive moves and later encouraged Hitler to move on Prague, removing the Czech Army (which had lost its fortifications) as a power factor.

In turn, this violation of the Munich agreement, and (inevitable) British inaction led to a public demand to "do something" to oppose Hitler; and Chamberlain's personal political embarrassment and vulnerability in this situation made it necessary to promise to "do something strong next time," in response to his inability to do anything at the moment and his embarrassment at having failed to foresee this move, having in fact predicted the opposite, and being so disregarded as a threat by Hitler.

Thus a failure to uphold a clear commitment in a situation where the military balance was actually favorable to the Allies led--as these analysts saw it--to a dangerously questionable commitment likely to be challenged in a military situation that was totally unfavorable, almost hopeless (precisely given the loss of the Czechs as an ally).

The foreseeable failure to carry out this commitment in any effective way when--as was virtually inevitable--it failed to deter and it was challenged--would in turn both encourage further attacks, at last close to home and inescapable, and demoralize efforts to prepare for these effectively.

As a challenge to what still seems the usual account--that the British guarantee to Poland was unarguable, a merely belated recognition of what had to be done to deter and confront Hitler--this argument that it had been a questionable and costly consequence of the earlier decision to back down was unfamiliar to me when I first heard it, and I am still not in a position to appraise it critically. The point here is not that it is necessarily valid in all respects, but that I can testify it was believed by more than one significant associates of my work in Washington, and I inferred the analogy operating in a number of allusions, at critical moments, in support of controversial, risky and violent moves, to the overriding objective of "avoiding World War III."

The potential here for a self-serving, dangerous use of this analogy in support of reckless courses actually undertaken primarily for domestic political or otherwise insufficient reasons, is obvious: or perhaps I should say, not obvious enough, to those

making or hearing the justification. (As the Pentagon Papers record repeatedly, nearly every disastrous escalation in Vietnam was justified by someone--Henry Cabot Lodge, Walt Rostow, LBJ and Dean Rusk come to mind--as inspired by the need to "avoid World War III." Nixon continued this trend, which resumed under Reagan and Bush during the "new Cold War").

Rarely is the logic spelled out, nor is it obvious on its face to a generation born after the Thirties, except for the element of the potential encouragement of the appetite and wishfulness of aggressors.

But as I have tried to point out, the underlying logic includes a more esoteric element, which bears on the dynamics of commitment in the "appeaser's" society and personal psychology. In one version of this, Chamberlain is actually criticised not only for his backdown at Munich but, under the ensuing circumstances, for his subsequent unilateral commitment to Poland. Even if the latter is seen as inescapable or appropriate, the political costs and consequences of making such a commitment and then not acting on it is seen as a cost of the original backdown, operating through non-rational psychological processes of humiliation, mass and individual self-esteem, desires for reprisal or revenge, and a general domestic shift towards the hawkish, chauvinistic right.

I personally recall an unusual discussion in the Pentagon in the spring of 1965 of the merit of committing ground troops to avert defeat, with my former RAND colleague Albert Wohlstetter, in which he argued that it would be bad for the domestic politics of this country, and ultimately for world peace in terms of the resulting changes inside this country, for the US to suffer a military defeat. Americans would not respond "well" to that, he warned; the results would be a turn to the right and probably to militarism that would be bad not only for Democrats, liberals and their domestic constituents and concerns but ultimately for foreigners as well.

(In 1969, the troops having been sent, with inconclusive and disastrous results, I heard the domestic side of that argument repeated from Democrats like Paul Warnke and Harry McPherson when I urged that Democrats take the lead in pulling the troops out: "We would be accused of losing the war, having gotten us in; there would be a political bloodbath such as you have never seen, and that means you and me, Dan."

I heard that argument as unacceptably political, then, as an excuse for passive complicity in the ongoing physical bloodbath in Indochina. But I mention it here to say that I don't doubt that if the argument had been pursued, such people would have pointed out quite sincerely that such a development inside the US could plausibly lead to further military involvements that would be even more violent and dangerous. This did not seem to me an adequate

reason for our continuing to kill people in Indochina then, either, but for those who sincerely thought it did, it made their international and moral commitments compatible with their domestic political calculations).

Yet another element of this calculation--the second part alluded to earlier--is the prediction that this dynamic will be underestimated in the government "winning" the first confrontation. Having just shown a commitment in its adversary to be a bluff or unreliable, it fails to appreciate that its next, growing challenge may elicit a new commitment that is more reliable, for that very reason. The combination, of course, is all the more dangerous.

However well this model fits the 1939-40 events, it was operating, I believe, in the minds of top decision-makers not only in the Cuban Missile Crisis but in the earlier Berlin crisis in 1961. And it has, in my opinion still, a good deal of basis in historical precedent, and relevance to the future.

It could be argued (though I don't recall seeing the point in print) that it is in terms of this pattern that there is a good deal of analogy between the events leading up to World War I and to World War II, which (in the clear absence of a Hitler in the former case) otherwise seem so different.

(1) Nearly every participant prior to World War I had participated in earlier confrontations and "crises" one or more of which had resulted in humiliating backdowns by one party, none of which had ended in violent threats being carried out;

2) This had led to general confidence that demonstration alerts and deployments, demands and threats, would be settled short of conflict, despite rhetorical posturing and commitment;

3) Yet in fact, by 1914, a number of key states had concluded that they could not afford to back off "this time, yet again," precisely in view of past humiliations and in fear of encouraging future, worse challenges, including internal ones, i.e., fear of a combination of domestic, intra-empire and external pressures.

The sequence of "mini-Munichs" had both encouraged new challenges and--underestimated by the challengers--made new commitments more likely and stronger. The explosion that resulted came as a surprise precisely because earlier "appeasements" had made it seem unlikely, while in fact these same "appeasements" had created an anti-appeasement, confrontational and resolute mood.

(The effects of alert and mobilization planning and emphasis on offensive warplans is another important factor, which did not figure so strongly in World War II, on the Allied side. Why not? Because the failure of the offensive, and the dangers of the

earlier reliance on it and the pressure to preempt, led the French in particular away from it, to rely disastrously on defensive arrangements alone.

In turn, failures in World War II of the defense (foreseeable in nuclear war) and a Cold War preoccupation with Hitlerian tactics (hence with nuclear war) had a strong potential for recreating in the subsequent nuclear era the stability problems and pressures to preempt that preceded World War I. This has been my particular concern in the last 15 years, as it was (given an illusory belief in the missile gap) in the late-50's until late 1961. (Large numbers of Soviet missiles on Cuba would have made this concern valid and immediate!)

World War I, in turn, made the resolute individual and alliance commitments that immediately preceded it look dangerous, and this was a factor in the "climate of appeasement" that both encouraged and, at first, rewarded Hitler: until his successes--like the crises-ending-short-of-war before World War I--encouraged him to "go too far" and simultaneously impelled his adversaries to take a stand.

Thus, it is not only generals who "fight the last war." In focussing on avoiding the mistakes that they, or their fathers, made "last time," politicians and diplomats create the conditions for new mistakes: or, strikingly often, not so new, but the mistakes of their "grandfathers," the errors of the "time before that." The word "dialectic" suggests itself rather compellingly.

Not only was this pattern in the minds of Kennedy Administration officials in 1961 and 1962, but Kennedy's own behavior is a striking example of it, a confirmation of its validity.

On the one hand, Kennedy officials tended to suspect--with somewhat guilty consciences, ~~or~~ having internalized the criticisms of their hardline opponents--that Khrushchev had been encouraged to make a move they regarded as unforeseeably reckless by what they suspected he saw as a sequence of weak, perhaps cowardly backdowns earlier: in particular, his failure to provide air support to the Bay of Pigs landing, to intervene in Laos, or to challenge the Berlin Wall.

He had, he believed (as James Reston revealed) given a personal impression of immaturity and weakness to Khrushchev at Vienna, following the humiliation of the Bay of Pigs. Most recently, in face of strong Republican pressure to do so, he had refused to take direct action to halt the large-scale buildup of Soviet military equipment and advisors in Cuba.

Khrushchev's move, unpredicted by CIA intelligence analysts

and especially by Kennedy, now seemed to confirm that Khrushchev had "misread" these decisions as "appeasement-like," just as had his most hawkish Republican critics. (The Kennedy officials were hawkish enough Cold Warriors themselves to believe in the plausibility of this, just as their Cold War orientation disposed them--i.e., us, including me--to believe that it would follow that this conclusion would encourage Khrushchev to make direct, provocative challenges. Only the risk of response, Cold Warriors believed, inhibited such challenges as a matter of course, and any attenuation of that fear "invited" tests and encroachments.

The secrecy of the Soviets' move was seen as indicating an awareness that it was illegitimate, something that would be done "only if you could get away with it" on the basis of a fait accompli in the context of American weakness or cowardice. For Russians apparently to confirm the Republican charge that Kennedy had been giving that impression was costly both on the domestic front and the international; and Kennedy could not escape personal responsibility for having (supposedly) given rise to this Soviet impression.

In fact, it is not clear at all that such an assessment was involved in the Soviet project, or indeed that this was Khrushchev's judgment of Kennedy or his past actions at all. (See Ned Lebow's article on this, and comments by Sergo Mikoyan and Sergei Khrushchev rejecting this interpretation). The record is murky, incomplete and quite mixed on this subject; there is at least as much evidence now that Khrushchev found Kennedy's behavior provocative as that he saw it as "weak."

A brief comment on the implications of the secrecy surrounding the attempted fait accompli: I conclude, tentatively, that, as Sergo Mikoyan asserts, this reflected the expectation that Kennedy would almost surely commit an act of war, illegal in peacetime--a blockade--to prevent the delivery of missiles as well as other military equipment if the Soviets announced publicly their intention in advance.

In other words, the Soviets probably thought it necessary to do secretly what the Americans themselves had done openly, what was legal for both, precisely because they foresaw dangerous, violent, illegal or aggressive American countermeasures otherwise. This is not a Soviet judgment of presidential "weakness," or of unduly constraining liberal commitment to international norms.

Moreover, countering any impression of weakness with respect to Cuba, Khrushchev knew (from Cuban penetrations) of Operation Mongoose, aimed at the overthrow of Castro, and (from American exercises) of tacit threats and preparations potentially to invade Cuba in 1962. But most Republicans and even most American officials (even including, probably, the Republican Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon, who was invited to sit on the ExCom)

knew nothing of these. If they had, it would have been easier to suppose that Khrushchev had felt challenged or provoked into risky moves than that he had felt "invited" by weakness.

Now, Kennedy himself, of course, was well aware of Mongoose and of preparations for possible invasion (which, in fact, in early October went beyond anything he could have expected Khrushchev to know). Moreover, this was also true of many of the key participants in the ExCom, who oversaw covert operations: McGeorge Bundy, Maxwell Taylor, Robert Kennedy (essentially in charge of Mongoose, along with Taylor), Alexis Johnson in State and Roswell Gilpatric in Defense and their bosses Rusk and McNamara. How could it be that there is no record in the available transcripts of October 16 (or later) of any mention of Mongoose, or recent urgent readiness for possible invasion, or of the implications of these for Khrushchev's possible motives?

This calls for extensive analysis, elsewhere. The point I want to make here is that Kennedy had reason to know that the impression of his prior weakness with respect to Cuba had not been given to Khrushchev or Castro so much as to his domestic Republican critics, who were moreover likely to make the (probably invalid) inference that he had actually "invited" this Soviet move thereby. That impression, charge and inference was thus--as McNamara put it--a domestic political problem. This consideration, by itself, does suggest that the crisis was, above all, a domestic one for Kennedy.

(It is not the whole story. Republicans would also charge--and Kennedy might have feared that it might be true--that his earlier backdowns on the Bay of Pigs and perhaps on the Wall--had also contributed to an impression in Khrushchev's mind that had led to this, and that had to be refuted to avoid future confrontations.

Still, it is interesting to note that this problem, insofar as it was domestic political, reflected Kennedy's inability to tell the American public, and his political opponents, something that his foreign adversaries actually knew: that he was acting "boldly," aggressively, as some of his domestic rivals were challenging him to do.

He could not tell them this, and take away their challenge, because his actual program was "covert," designed to be "plausibly denied": denied plausibly to the American public, not to his adversaries, because the program--which his hawkish rivals would presumably have approved, or were even calling for--was, after all, illegal, aggressive, and dangerously provocative of largescale conflict!

[Bay of Pigs, 1960; Mongoose; U-2, 1956-60; 34A and plans for Rolling Thunder, 1964-65. See Nixon in My Six Crises, on the dilemma posed for him by JFKs taunts on the need to support

U2
1964, VV
34A

US ability
to keep
secrets: in
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contras. (Likewise, JFK was pressing on the missile gap. But N wasn't tempted to reveal what the U2 really showed, because like Rockefeller but unlike Ike or ^{Sec. Gates} he wanted to preserve the sense of Soviet threat himself). (nuc threats and Taiwan Straits crises: assurance that Chinese wouldn't invade). Presidential restraint on revelation; and see Soviet inferences on American ability to keep secrets! But in each case, President's problem of how to appear tough enough without revealing what he was actually doing.] (See Reagan's inability to reveal invasion plans, which made sense of contras and of Central American deployments).

[see effects of Republican taunting on JFK; as, of Democratic taunting on Bush, leading to Panama invasion (he couldn't tell all covert ops, which were't working fast).]

Also, he couldn't tell the public this before October 16 because--as in the case of LBJ in the campaign of 1964--he wanted to be able to use the covert program as a possible source of provocation of or simulation of enemy actions that would enable him to "retaliate" openly with direct American intervention. (The Bay of Pigs was probably planned the same way, but aborted).

After October 16, it was too late to take credit for his earlier covert pressures, because they seemed to have led only to this! ...to a Soviet countermove that appeared to, and might eventually, shift the strategic balance, reduce stability disastrously, encourage Soviet moves against Berlin...and meanwhile, lock the door against US invasion of Cuba! Nor would it be helpful in attacking or bargaining the Soviet missiles out of Cuba to have to admit that illegal aggressive moves by the US had probably been the provocation and the political legitimation of the Soviet deployment! (So instead: the secret of Mongoose and of October contingency planning for invasion was excluded from any discussion in the ExCom and kept successfully from the public: Mongoose, for 15 years. The basic premises of Mongoose planning--that US intervention would ultimately be necessary to meet the Mongoose objective of overthrowing Castro--and the pattern of invasion exercises and contingency planning and preparations for invasion, for 28 years.)

~~has been secret for~~ see Beschloss.

(Compare what happened on August 2 and 3, 1964, when North Vietnamese torpedo boats approached and were interpreted as attempting to attack a US destroyer on intelligence patrol. The Administration briefed Congressional leaders, including Republicans, secretly on the fact that the Vietnamese might have, plausibly but "mistakenly" associated the destroyer with covert attacks against North Vietnam being made by the "South Vietnamese" (in fact, CIA-controlled missions, mainly manned by non-Vietnamese). Hence it would not be appropriate to retaliate, this time: though the destroyer patrol was doubled and sent back, and the covert raids--which were, in fact, associated with it--were continued.

A mistaken belief on the following stormy night by the destroyer commanders that they were again under attack--i.e., to put it another way, their plausible though mistaken belief, in a situation of zero visibility, that the same pattern of US behavior had again provoked Vietnamese response--not unnaturally ensued, which this time allowed the President to do openly what his opponent had been calling on him to do and what he had been secretly preparing for over months.

In the first meeting of the ExCom on October 16, 1962, JFK purported to want to respond as LBJ later did to the supposed "second" Vietnamese attack of August 4, 1964: with a fait accompli consisting of a military attack destroying the offending vehicles (missiles in 1962, torpedo boats, bases and petrol stocks in 1964. (LBJ had in that case, less than two years later, almost the same principal advisors that JFK gathered on the ExCom: Bundy, McNamara, Rusk, Maxwell Taylor, McCone). TC 8 FA

But there were crucial differences from the '64 Tonkin Gulf situation that blocked this approach in 1964. (I suspect that JFK had abandoned this impulse, if he really supported it when he said so as late as midday October 16, by that evening or the next day, as his principal advisor McNamara had done even earlier. O'Donnell's memoir indicates clearly that he had rejected an air strike for a blockade no later than Thursday morning, October 18, --when he instructed RFK to bring the ExCom around to a consensus on the blockade--or well before his supposed "conversion" by the ExCom on October 20.)

In '62, unlike '64, Kennedy was confronting the Soviets directly, the targets were nuclear-tipped missiles one or more of which might be launched under attack, and the "provocation" consisted not of an armed and purportedly "unprovoked" attack on US forces but of a perfectly legal deployment following US precedents.

But there is another comparison to be made: for the first time here, to my knowledge. On October 16, Kennedy could not do what LBJ did on August 2: secretly explain inaction to Congressional leaders on the basis of possible provocation of the Soviets. The Soviet response was too serious for JFK to be willing to admit having probably provoked it. (His administration never did: even in the ExCom meetings. Thus there was no discussion or known consideration of this option at all).

Neither was there, more notably, any known discussion among any of the ExCom participants prior to Khrushchev's letter of October 26 of a quite plausible alternative either to military attack or threat or to a bargain based on a trade of missile bases. [Note: again, the discussion which follows, which probably does not

belong at this length here, is essentially a new thought for me: and as far as I know, for anyone else. July 20, 1990.]

This alternative was to exploit a secret "bargaining chip" whose possible importance to the Soviets and Cubans was not known to any American outsiders to the Administration in 1962 or for 15-25 years later, but which many of the ExCom members knew enough about to guess at and which they might have well have proposed to explore: a proposal that the Soviets withdraw their missiles in exchange for an American pledge not to invade Cuba, not to continue to launch covert attacks upon the island or to permit and support attacks by others, and not to continue attempting to assassinate Fidel Castro.

By October 16, it seems, with the missiles actually on the island and Soviet troops present in large numbers, Castro himself would probably have preferred to keep the missiles than to have a "verbal" pledge, which he would not trust. We know this because this is the attitude he actually took when the Soviets ended, without consulting him, by actually agreeing to withdraw the missiles in exchange for a no-invasion pledge (no mention of covert operations or assassination attempts, both of which, in fact, continued on a reduced scale).

But that was not the attitude of the Soviets by October 27; and it might well not have been their attitude on October 16, or on October 18 when JFK could have discussed this in the White House with Gromyko. The proposal could have been accompanied by a threat, either more or less explicitly stated, of possible or likely US forceful action, such as blockade, if it were rejected.

Note that the proposed package goes beyond the no-invasion pledge that was (rather ambiguously, in the end) the basis of formal settlement: though that alone might have been enough for an early settlement, in the light of our recently-acquired knowledge of the serious basis for Soviet concern about possible invasion. And it is also notable that this pledge, by itself, was not at all discussed in the early "secret" phase of the crisis nor for several days after the blockade began. But the additional part of this possible package--a definite commitment to cease sabotage and other covert attacks and perhaps--this would have to be very delicately and tacitly communicated--cease trying to assassinate Cuba's leader--was neither offered in the end nor ever, so far as the record shows, discussed at all.

These would have been, in October 1962, very substantial "concessions." Even Castro might have been persuaded, if the commitments could have been made credible enough. (He might have asked further--as he did during the crisis--for the ending of Cuba's economic and diplomatic isolation). But the Soviets would surely have been, at the least, very tempted. They might well have

accepted this.

Some would say that combined with even an implicit hint of possible forceful action, this offer would almost certainly have been accepted by Khrushchev. (Victor Sergeev, who has studied the crisis for years at the USA and Canada Institute, is convinced that Khrushchev would almost certainly have withdrawn the missiles if Kennedy had simply revealed to Gromyko that the attempted fait accompli had been discovered. His argument supporting this judgement is not totally compelling; but his positive judgment of the acceptability of the above offer, especially along with a tacit threat, can be predicted, and it would have far more plausibility).

American analysts up till 1987, and most perhaps even since then, would not agree, because they have always seen the strategic advantages to the Soviets of keeping missiles on Cuba as predominant in Soviet calculations. But this judgment by most American scholars has crucially reflected their total ignorance--until Jim Hershberg's revelations starting in 1987 and published in great detail only this summer--of the reality of US preparations for possible invasion, or the seriousness with which planners saw MongOOSE as primarily a precursor to invasion, along with assassination efforts. (The MongOOSE documents showing this were released only this spring, after the Moscow Conference on Cuba II).

The idea of a diplomatic or private bargaining approach instead of the public confrontation and announcement of blockade was certainly considered--both during the crisis, from the beginning, and in subsequent discussions--and the private reasoning against it has never been satisfactorily or convincingly presented.

What was to be lost or risked in exploring Soviet willingness to settle the issue privately? That is a question I will consider in detail elsewhere; I conjecture that there were some serious possible disadvantages to this approach, from the Administration point of view.

But no one, to my knowledge, has ever focussed on the possible effectiveness of these particular offers, which might have been considered either separately (as, finally, the no-invasion part was) or as a package. Rather, the potential quid pro quos for the removal of the missiles are left unspecified, or focus on trades of missile or other bases. The judgment is implied that--in the absence of forceful threats accompanied by dramatic demonstrative actions (like the blockade)--the US had little to offer that might appear adequate compensation to the Soviets for their deployment.

Meanwhile, both the Cubans and Soviets, privately and publicly, had been for nearly a year complaining repeatedly and vociferously about US preparations to invade Cuba, and about

ongoing US-sponsored covert attacks on the island. (Not, I believe, about assassination attempts, though Castro knew of at least some of these). The President and the key members of the ExCom knew throughout this period that these complaints were not just propaganda, paranoia or hysteria, contrary to Administration declarations.

The Administration may have doubted, through the spring of 1962, that the Soviets actually cared as much as they purported about the threat to Cuba. (Here there may have been a genuine, significant failure of empathy, a not-unusual failure to apply "mirror-image reasoning," to ask how we would have felt about the prospect of "losing" a comparable ally, and what we might have thought about doing to avoid that). But as heavy shipments of Soviet equipment began to arrive in the early summer of 1962, this evidence of real Soviet concern must have been in the minds both of analysts and decision-makers.

Since most of them rejected the hypothesis that the buildup aimed eventually at a change in the strategic balance by introducing missiles, they must have asked why the Soviets were making this expensive investment (to which the Republicans were drawing public attention continuously). And for those high-level officials who knew about Mongoose and the pattern of maneuvers practising invasion--which did not include, so Ray Garthoff tells me, CIA analysts in the Directorate of Intelligence or State intelligence analysts in INR or the Political-Military Directorate--this question had an easy answer, as did the question, in light of these shipments, as to whether the Soviets cared very much about losing Cuba.

(This could explain, by the way, (for the first time, so far as I am aware) why John McCone, the Director of Central Intelligence, disagreed with all his own analysts in CIA's DDI, including the Office of National Estimates, about the likelihood that the Soviets would go so far as to put missiles in Cuba. He knew about Mongoose, as (according to Garthoff--who himself was ignorant of Mongoose working in Political-Military Affairs) his analysts did not! We cannot learn from the record of his communications with his analysts how much relative importance he gave to this Soviet motive--compared, say, to improving the strategic balance--because he evidently did not feel free to inform his analysts of the evidence that this motive might have any weight at all.

Reformers of the intelligence community often urge that Operations and Estimates be further separated, to avoid the alleged contamination of Estimates by the wishes and recommendations of the Covert Operators. But here is a case--certainly not the only one--in which the efforts of intelligence analysts to interpret Soviet and Cuban motivation and behavior on a crucial issue were almost totally subverted by compartmentation, by their enforced ignorance

of actual operations known to the high officials they were trying to advise and to the Soviets but not to themselves. In these circumstances the fact that Clandestine Operations and Intelligence Analysis are housed in the same agency and building failed to have any benefit in the production of relevant intelligence estimates, given the fact that operators were not permitted to inform estimators of their own activities.

Interestingly, this exact situation had arisen, with the same extremely costly consequences, in the period leading up to Cuba I, the Bay of Pigs, where intelligence analysts were not called upon for special estimates because they were not cleared for the operational plans, and their ongoing interpretations of Cuban affairs were uninformed by data well known to Cuban penetrators in the contras. Despite all the vaunted lesson-learning from "The Perfect Failure," this particular absurdity was immediately replicated.

Thus, the key "witting" officials were forced to be their own intelligence analysts, as the Soviet buildup proceeded and finally culminated in the deployment of missiles. Still, to someone in the know about US contingency plans, maneuvers and covert operators, it would not seem to take a highly trained and experienced intelligence analyst to make a good guess about Soviet motives--such as, that the Soviets might actually mean what they had been saying to us and the world about their concerns regarding Cuba over the last year, and specifically in September and October--or an equally good guess as to what offers and assurances might look relevant and attractive enough to the Soviets and Cubans to induce a return to the status quo ante.

Yet we find in the available record, either before or during the crisis until its final days no evidence of any consideration of either of these. Not until there is discussion of the Fomin proposal or the Krushchev letter of October 26 is there any mention at all of a no-invasion pledge as possibly an important element in achieving a settlement (even then it is discussed as if it were an insubstantial face-saving device to cover a Soviet backdown) let alone any earlier thought of actually proposing this to the Soviets as a possible resolution, either before the blockade or after.

Nor is there any mention at all of possible termination of the heavy program of covert operations into and against Cuba as a possible bargaining counter.

How can this be?

One interpretation of this omission from the recorded discussion is that it reflects a massive, systematic failure of individual and group cognition and imagination. This is not entirely to be dismissed, but it is not the only hypothesis worth exploring.

Another is that the record, in particular of ExCom discussions, is simply incomplete. Even for the two days for which major transcripts are available, there are admitted deletions for security. These could certainly cover discussions of Mongoose and prior invasion plans--even though Mongoose had been revealed in the Church Committee reports, well before these transcriptions were made. (The crucial relation of Mongoose planning to invasion planning had not been revealed, however).

However, if the subsequent interpretations of Soviet behavior reflecting knowledge of Mongoose were also deleted (no such interpretations appear in the transcripts or summaries), along with any discussion of possible bargains involving no-invasion or no covert attack pledges, the deletions would be very large indeed. And much of the discussion that does appear, in particular indicating perplexity about Soviet motives, would be hard to understand. Still, this possibility is not to be dismissed.

Yet another explanation would be that the President and those other members of the ExCom who were "witting" about covert operations and contingency plans and maneuvers regarding Cuba chose not to enlighten those other members who were previously unwitting, thus truncating allowable discussion within the larger group. This is quite plausible. It means that serious discussion about Soviet motives and hence, possible Soviet reactions to US moves and to potential US proposals would have to go on outside the ExCom meetings, in much smaller groups; but that would be only normal.

That does, however, raise the question (quite new to discussions of the crisis): What was the function of the larger ExCom at all, in that case? (I have a conjecture on that point, to be discussed elsewhere. Briefly, I suspect that the full-scale ExCom--especially in the week prior to October 22, Kennedy's public statement--was essentially not a decision-making body but a consensus-building and manipulative exercise, meant to persuade several unwitting participants--such as, in particular, Douglas Dillon--to a politically safe view of the origins of the crisis and the appropriateness of Kennedy's preferred course (so far as they were allowed to understand it). In the second week, it offered itself as a useful implementing group, though at the price of getting somewhat out of the President's control on Saturday, October 27.

A respectful but "insubordinate" response by ExCom members led by McGeorge Bundy to Kennedy's desire to accept "Soviet" terms (trading missile bases in Cuba and Turkey) that he had himself secretly suggested to the Soviets two days earlier, led (I believe) Kennedy to modify and postpone his own planned resolution by a day or more and meanwhile to make a final ultimatum that he privately regarded as an unpromising bluff.

(With the help, unknown to Kennedy, of unauthorized action by a Soviet SAM commander and by Castro and his antiaircraft gunners, this temporary rejection of the deal that Kennedy himself had privately proposed earlier in favor of a bluff had the ironic effect that the diplomatic compromise that Kennedy expected to make--mounting to Soviet victory--was preempted by Soviet surrender,)

How is it that all analysts so far have failed to notice the omission from the available materials and the records of ExCom sessions of any indication that anyone considered proposing a pledge not to invade or to launch or support covert attacks as a possible settlement of the crisis?

After all, the crisis was formally settled in the end on the basis of a no-invasion pledge; and Castro at that time and afterwards was demanding an end to covert attacks. How is it that no outsider has ever asked the question: Might that settlement have been reached earlier? Why wasn't proposing it considered?

The answer is that until data became available from Jim Hershberg and from Soviets in late 1987, and from Mongoose files in early 1990--summarized in Jim Hershberg's article in Diplomatic History just this summer of 1990--these outsiders (and insiders like myself and Garthoff, and some unwitting members of the ExCom) were totally unaware of the substantial basis that the Soviets and Cubans had for concern that Cuba might be invaded, and hence the potential power of a credible no-invasion pledge.

Information on the scale of Mongoose attacks was available a decade earlier, but no real hint of the relation of Mongoose planning, aims and operations to possible US invasion. Thus, it would not have seemed related to possible Soviet motives for deploying the missiles or other equipment or Cuban motives for accepting them.

Why were we all unaware of this--despite a copious record of Soviet and Cuban charges and complaints at the time, and emphasis in all official Soviet statements after October 28 and later in Khrushchev's memoirs on the US invasion threat as the reason for deploying the missiles and the no-invasion pledge as the reason for removing them?

Basically because we believed our leaders, JFK and his officials, when they dismissed these charges and complaints and denied any planning for invasion: as McGeorge Bundy and McNamara were still doing as late as this year (though McNamara changed his denial of "any planning" to denial of "intent" and admitted a plausible "appearance" of potential intent). We believed their lies at the time, and curiously, continued to do so even after Vietnam. And their secrecy was very good. It was virtually

watertight on these points for 25 years.

As to why the Soviets were not believed at all--why their own explanations, before 1987 were treated by our analysts as if they had never been uttered, as being wholly dismissable--there were a number of reasons I will discuss elsewhere. (It is a question worthy of note and reflection, in retrospect, from an epistemological and historiographical point of view).

But the substantive question is: Why did not JFK himself propose, or consider proposing, this resolution of the problem, either along with or before his announcement of the blockade? Why did not the witting members of the ExCom suggest that he do so? He and they did have strong reason to know that such a proposal might work to remove the missiles: perhaps without any public crisis at all.

And such a deal was surely acceptable to them: undoubtedly it would have seemed so on October 16, as well as on October 27, when they proposed it. Why did they not even consider or discuss finding out whether it might be acceptable to the Soviets?

(Note, by the way, that two of the advisors who almost surely did not know either of Mongoose or of the preparations for invasion were the two Soviet experts consulted, Chip Bohlen--before he left for Paris--and Llewellyn Thompson. There is no indication that either were informed on these matters during the crisis--which considerably limited the value of their inferences on Soviet motives!--so as to get their judgment, for example, of the possible acceptability of such a deal. Such is the price that Presidents are willing to pay to maintain compartmentation of information!)

First of all, we do not know for sure that this possibility was not considered at all. It may have been deleted from the ExCom transcripts and minutes; and it may have been incorporated in the efforts by Bundy and Sorensen to draft a private communication to Khrushchev in the early days of the crisis, whose contents are not available. We do know the proposal was not made, and that no hint of consideration of this--if there was any--was allowed to remain in the records. Why not?

The reason seems to me clearly to be that such a proposal prior to the blockade, and even any leak that it had been considered, would have seemed dangerous in domestic political terms: in particular, just before a Congressional election, but just as importantly in the months and years afterward. (The subtitle of the article by Paterson and Brophy conveys its real scope: "The Cuban Missile Crisis and American Politics, 1962." But the political pressures expressed and intensified in 1962 had meaning for the President and a potential influence on his decisions that went far beyond their bearing on "November elections" alone.)

The Republican opponents who were already focussing on Soviet aid to Cuba as the main issue of the fall campaign would have been outraged at a no-invasion pledge (never mind the demands of international law, the UN Charter or the OAS Charter!), and most of all in the context of this most provocative Soviet deployment. They were angry and critical of the deal 13 days later, but after most of the country, and much of the world, had been scared out of its wits for five dramatic days their carping was lost in a wave of relief.

At the same time, on October 16 and thereafter, most of the country would have been extremely critical if they learned--as the very proposal would suggest--that a covert program had led to this, provocatively. That is an inference that the Administration took extreme care to avert, by secrecy and denials, not only at the outset and during the crisis, but ever afterwards, up to the present.

After five days of overt crisis on the brink of war between nuclear powers, after giving the Soviets the obvious incentive to compromise or concede in order to reduce a clear and credible risk of general war, the Administration could plausibly present this threat as the sole reason for Soviet acceptance, presenting its no-invasion pledge as an insubstantial face-saving favor to the Soviets, no real concession at all.¹

Thus it avoided any domestic inference that earlier, unacknowledged (and illegal, even if potentially domestically popular) Administration moves might have contributed to this problem: that the crisis did not start with the Soviet deployment (as implied in the US framing of the incident as a "missile crisis") but with earlier US pressures on Cuba (to which the Soviets allude in referring always to a "Caribbean crisis").

The price of this successful effort to frame the episode in this way, to manage public awareness of the problem and appreciation of the outcome was that there had to be a dramatic crisis, with a genuine risk of US-Soviet war.

It might have turned out, if Kennedy had explored private negotiations, that there was no acceptable alternative to such a

¹ The threat and risk--including the risk of loss of control Khrushchev was consciously confronting on October 27--might well have been sufficient by this point to bring a Soviet concession, even without a no-invasion pledge. The issue the Administration was obscuring was that it might never have been necessary to take moves incurring such risks of war if Kennedy had been willing--if he "could have afforded"--to take the domestic political risk of proposing a negotiated outcome at the outset or soon after.

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crisis. But he chose not to explore such an alternative with the Soviets; he chose instead the certainty of crisis, with real risk: even, however small, a risk of ultimate catastrophe. And the reason he did so, almost surely, was "American politics, 1962."